Community and Celebration
Acts 2:42 Exodus 19:1-6
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You and I are an accumulation of our past experiences. We become who we become as a result of years of input, extending back into our infancy. Sometimes we have to go home to rediscover who we are. Not in order to live in the past rather than the present, but simply to be reminded of those places, persons and experiences which coincided in our history and formed us into what we are today. Going back to Pennsylvania does that for me. I like to walk the same streets I did as a child: to spend time in the alley where many hours were devoted to play: to look out the car window at the school - the baseball diamond. It's partly an exercise in nostalgia, of course, but it's also a very personal, very warm reminder of who I am - because these are the places where I had the experiences that made me. All of us do that occasionally. If we can't go back physically, we keep symbols of that place - those experiences - those persons: scrapbooks, photographs, trophies, momentos. They serve the same purpose: they tell us who we are.

The Church needs to undergo that exercise too. We have our symbols - our ancient creeds and liturgies, our sacraments and traditions - which remind us that the church was once an infant: that we, as churchmen, share a history that extends thousands of years into the past. We can't go back, but occasionally we ought to return, mentally, to those early, formative years: to be reminded who we are by acknowledging who we were back in the 1st century.

That is what I propose to do this morning: take a brief walk through the past: look at that early church: and then look at ourselves in light of what we have seen.

The fifth book in the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles, is all we have by way of an historical record of the earliest church. By that, I mean the group of believers who were in Jerusalem immediately

after the death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord. That is where we, as churchmen, came from. Through that church we rediscover who we are. The Acts of the Apostles gives us several fleeting but fascinating glimpses of the early church. It was apparently a very tightly-knit community, not large at first. We assume that the believers were together most of the time, perhaps even living together. They shared all they had. If any had real estate or real property, and another was in need, it was sold and the need was filled. They were seen daily in the Temple, they were held in high esteem in those early days, and many were sufficiently intrigued by their life style and their message to seek admittance to their group. They were obviously a care-free lot. They spent most of their time praying, teaching, preaching, tending to the communal affairs of the group and waiting, - waiting for what they believed would be the imminent return of the Lord.

Now, there have always been some people who want the church to return to its original form. Well-meaning advocates of church renewal have always been inclined to hold up this particular form of the church as the only, and divinely inspired model. That's not what I have in mind. That makes no more sense than you or I returning to the scene of our childhood and actually attempting to relive the experiences of our past. Some, of course, do try, and it is futile and very sad.

The early Christian Church showed its flexibility by changing its style relatively quickly. The end didn't come as they had expected. The church, it became apparent, had to find a form that would allow it to "settle in" for a long stay. Besides they must have been notoriously "broke". On several occasions St. Paul solicited the financial gifts of churches in other cities for the "Saints in Jerusalem" - which leads us to assume that the utopian form of communism which they practiced just didn't work.

The point is that the early church is not valid as a model or prototype of contemporary church style. But the distinguishing characteristics of that church are: the things they did which marked them as a new and

compelling and winsome type of humanity. Church history is the story of an institution desparately trying to preserve those characteristics, and occasionally selling out, compromising its own identity by a merger of convenience with the dominant culture of the time. But church history is also the story of that same institution reversing itself, time and time again, by rediscovering and returning to those peculiar Christian characteristics of the earliest church. It is the story of the church, in every age, discovering what it is.

"They met constantly to hear the apostles teach, and to share the common life, to break bread, and to pray. A sense of awe was everywhere... with one mind they kept up their daily attendance at the Temple, and, breaking bread in private houses, shared their meals with unaffected joy, as they praised God and enjoyed the favor of the people." [Acts 2:42,46] That's how the New English Bible translates it, and two words, I believe, serve as focal points for our observation - "celebration" - including prayer, praise, joy - and "community", including the common meals, the concern for the welfare of all, the sense of distinctive identity which set them apart from everyone else.

Now before we go any further you and I probably have to undergo an instant but major reorientation at this point. Because, in fact, our Christianity has been pretty middle class and American and therefore individualistic. The focus has been on the individual's relationship with God; the individual struggle of faith and the end result of personal piety and hopefully salvation. Membership in the church, in this particular culture, is not at all seen to be the equivalent of Christian faith. Faith is some ambiguous emotion that some people have and some people don't and which, in any case, is a matter entirely between a man and his God. Church membership really doesn't have much to do with belonging to a community, any more so than membership in any number of organizations which are established on a common goal. If you doubt this, ask your

neighbor who doesn't belong to the church, whether or not he considers himself a Christian. He will answer "yes" - at which point we ought to be able to tell him that he hasn't the foggiest notion of what he's talking about. But that's another story, and besides I'm not at all sure we, in the church, believe it either. Because if we did this sanctuary whould be full.

In any case, from the very beginning the Bible talks in terms of "community" - not individuals. Someone has said that there is no such thing as a solitary Jew. And the meaning of that is that the Heberaic tradition deals with a covenant community made up of people who realize their individuality only in relationship with the other members of the community. At Mt. Sinai, God said to Moses - "... out of all peoples you shall become my special possession.... you shall be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation ..." [Ex. 19:6] In the Bible God calls men into community, into relationship with other men. That is how the early church saw itself - as the new Israel, the new covenant community. And that is where we must begin if we are going to recover our identity - with a new sense of the community of faith - the true fellowship of Christ.

That, I believe, is the major item on the agenda for the church in our day: - recovering its identity as a community, a community characterized by its celebrating. On both counts we are in trouble today.

It was brought home to me recently in a discussion of the meaning of church membership that our worship service is not very joyful; not at all a celebration. Now that comes as a surprise to no one. And yet I confess, at this point, to not know what to do about it. Think for a minute about the words of some of the great hymns of praise we sing to begin our service: "Joyful, Joyful we adore thee", "Praise ye the Lord, the King of Creation", "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty! Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee!" Think about the fact that we confess our sin, and then declare - "In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven." That's a very happy thought - and the vehicle for our happiness is the singing of "Glory

be to the Father and to the Son etc." Think about the privilege of sitting in this sanctuary - in this country - in this time - and having the opportunity of sharing some small portion of our affluence. And standing together as our gifts symbolically join the gifts of millions of others and singing "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." All the ingredients for celebration are here. We could change them a little. But I don't think that's the problem. I'm inclined, rather, to raise the question of the whole attitude of the average churchman when he goes to worship. I don't think he goes to celebrate anything. And I don't think shuffling the service will help much until he hears the good news and feels the need to celebrate its goodness.

I heard an apocryphal illustration recently that says it all. The Rev. Mety Rollins, a Presbyterian minister and Executive Director of the Caucus of Black Churchmen had concluded an address and was answering questions from the audience. One man asked him if he attended an integrated church. He smiled broadly and said - "only during football season. You see you folks go to church to get out. I know that if I attend a white church I'll be home for the Jets' kickoff. But in the Black Church we go to celebrate, and we don't go home till we're done celebrating."

We're in trouble because we've lost that sense of celebration so characteristic of the early church. And community - sometimes I feel that there is more real community in the corner tavern, the fraternity house, at the cocktail party, in the army - than there ever is in the church of Jesus Christ. I know there is in the whole hippie movement. I've seen it. They care for each other: they depend on each other: they support each other. Their very presence judges the church of Jesus Christ because they have something we ought to have - something we're always talking about but rarely experiencing - a sense of unity, a oneness, a communality that reaches out to include all: an openness that excludes no one.

What do we have to offer the world if it is not that? Particularly today, in a culture that finds itself dangerously and radically polarized, what do we have to offer if it is not a Gospel that is expressed in love and acceptance and genuine affection between people. We are fractured politically, with the rhetoric from both sides increasing in both volume and venom. We are fractured economically - with the poor getting poorer the the rich adamantly retreating from anything that sounds like a threat to their affluence. We are fractured racially with the blacks having given up on our noble sounding talk about integration, and the whites solemnly agreeing that you can't go too fast in these things: and most tragically of all, we are fractured across generation gap that shouldn't even exist. We find ourselves unable even to communicate because of hair, and dress and a life style that scares us to death because of its gut level integrity.

We - you and I - ought to be showing that fractured world what it means to accept someone with whom we disagree: what it means to forgive and to be forgiven: what it means to love and be loved. We ought to be a model - of people bound together in spite of their differences: a people who have a depth and breadth that transcends politics, economics, race, and certainly age. The Rev. William Laws, Moderator of the General Assembly said: "We are God's gifts to each other." We need to learn what that means.

It would be embarassing if I said: "I love you." I do - but I don't know how to say that. It would be extremely embarassing if I asked you right now to turn and tell a fellow Christian that you loved him. I think you do - or you want to - but you don't know how either. And yet until we learn how to do that: to express care and concern and affection for each other here, in this place, we aren't going to do much about community. And if all we do is talk about community, we aren't really ever going to get around to celebrating anything.

Why is it so important? Because the goodness of the Gospel is disguised and hidden away in the six-day emptiness of this sanctuary until we celebrate

it - here - and then everyday. Because the love of God is just an intellectual abstraction until it is expressed between men. Not many of us are fortunate enough to have had a mystical experience in which we truly sensed God's love for us. If we have, it hasn't happened often. The truth is that God's love gets expressed through men who have the courage to show their love for each other. That's how God himself arranged it. His love became incarnate - in his own son - who proceeded to show it and live it and die expressing it. That's how it always has been in the church. That's how we must be.

"Our business as the Church", Revel Howe once said [p. 95, Man's Need and God's Action] "is the business for which God brought her into being namely to be the relationship through which men may experience, at least partially, the love of God that reconciles us to Himself and to one another." To that I would add, only,

Amen.

You have shown us, our Father, what it means to love. You have called us into your church in order that we might celebrate that love for all the world to see. Help us to overcome the barriers which we have constructed around ourselves - help us to love - through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.